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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000760

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL, DRL/IRF, DRL/CRA; NSC
FOR E. MILLARD

PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05-11-14

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL SOCI KIRF CE

SUBJECT: Amid decline in number of church attacks, new calls for "anti-conversion" law could spark tensions

Refs: (A) Colombo 747, and previous

- (B) SA/INS-Colombo 05/06/04 unclass email

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Over the course of the past several months, there has been a sharp decline in the number of attacks on Christian churches in Sri Lanka compared to the late 2003 - early 2004 timeframe. The decline seems attributable, at least in part, to the public condemnation of the attacks by GSL officials and also solid police work which has led to the arrest and prosecution of a number of alleged perpetrators. That said, Mission has received recent reports that there may have been two more attacks in April. The overall positive trend in the situation could be disrupted if the JHU party, led by Buddhist monks, moves forward with plans to submit an "anti-conversion" bill to Parliament soon. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) SHARP DECLINE IN NUMBER OF CHURCH ATTACKS: Over the course of the past several months, there has been a sharp decline in the number of attacks on Christian churches in Sri Lanka compared to the late 2003 - early 2004 timeframe. From August 2003 until early February 2004, Mission confirmed that dozens of attacks on Christian churches, and sometimes on pastors and parishioners (see Ref A) had taken place. By early February, reports of attacks had largely tapered off, although Mission has recently heard that there may have been at least two new attacks in April (see Para 5 below).

¶3. (C) GSL STEPS: The decline in the number of attacks seems attributable, at least in part, to two major factors: the public condemnation of the attacks by GSL officials and solid police work. In early 2004, for example, President Kumaratunga publicly condemned the attacks and warned that perpetrators would be punished. Other GSL officials have also spoke out in public against the attacks. In terms of stepped-up law enforcement, the police also arrested at least two separate gangs of alleged perpetrators. In one such case, seven men were arrested for attacking an Apostolic church in Kurunegala District in north-central Sri Lanka in February. The men, who were later released on bail, face a court date in July, according to Officer-in-Charge S.I. Chandrasekera. In another case in Kurunegala District, three men were arrested in February for allegedly attacking a church with firebombs. They were subsequently released on bail. Kurunegala District Police Inspector Sanjeeva Bandara told Pol FSN on May 11 that the case of the three men is scheduled to come to trial in early June. Former Interior Ministry Secretary M.N. Junaid told the DCM and RSO May 11 that the February arrests had broken the back of the main groups of perpetrators, which had included Buddhist monks and one university professor.

¶4. (C) Commenting on the situation, Reverend David Beling, a Colombo-based pastor with the Assemblies of God religious denomination who has been outspoken on the situation, told poloff on May 11 that he thought that the frequency and the intensity of attacks on churches had decreased significantly in recent months. He attributed this turn of events to "people's interests shifting to other matters," such as the April 2 parliamentary elections.

¶5. (SBU) REPORTS OF NEW ATTACKS: Despite the ebb in the overall number of attacks since February, Mission has recently heard that at least two incidents may have taken place in April. Information on the two reported incidents is contained below:

-- On April 11 (Easter Sunday), the Christian Fellowship Church in Wadduwa town, located approximately 30 kilometers south of Colombo, was allegedly attacked by a mob led by a Buddhist monk. Members of the mob threw

rocks through the windows of the church and beat worshippers with sticks as they attempted to exit the church, according to Roshini Wickremesinghe, the Communications Director of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka. Mission has confirmed that local police are investigating the incident.

-- Also on April 11, the residence of a pastor of an Assembly of God church in Ampara District in eastern Sri Lanka was firebombed. There were no injuries in the attack. Police are investigating the incident.

16. (C) RENEWED CALLS FOR "ANTI-CONVERSION" LAW: In other religious freedom developments, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party has publicly pledged to introduce legislation in Parliament that would prohibit religious conversions. (The JHU is a new party that has nine MPs in Parliament. All of the MPs are Buddhist monks.) Athureliye Rathana, the JHU spokesperson, told us on May 11 that the JHU would attempt to introduce the bill when Parliament reopened on May 18. (In 2003, "anti-conversion" legislation was drafted, but was never formally introduced in Parliament.) In an article in the English-language Sunday LEADER on May 9, Rathana -- touching on common themes often mentioned by those who support such legislation -- was quoted as stating: "there are groups of people that take advantage of the poverty of the people by giving them money to convert them" and "people should not be forced to accept another religion." The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government has not indicated whether or not it would support an "anti-conversion" bill, although most observers believe it would not. Christian Affairs Minister Milroy Fernando, for example, has been quoted in the press as stating that he would have serious qualms about any such proposal. For its part, the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, a key UPFA coalition partner, has yet to commit itself to proposed legislation in this area. In a May 10 conversation with DCM, former Interior and Christian Affairs Minister (and UNP member of Parliament) John Amaralunga said he doubted the legislation would pass if put forward.

17. (C) COMMENT: The overall news in the religious freedom area is positive at this point. The sharp decline in the number of attacks on churches is particularly welcome given that the number of such incidents was at epidemic levels in 2003 - early 2004. We believe that USG discussions with GSL interlocutors helped prod the Sri Lankan government to take a stronger tack against the attacks and their perpetrators. The bad news is that the renewed calls for "anti-conversion" legislation could disrupt current positive trends by sparking religious tensions. It would seem a tough sell to deter the leaders of the JHU from pressing the proposed bill, as they seem quite committed to moving forward on the matter. While it has not firmly committed itself one way or the other, our sense is that the government will be hesitant to go along with the JHU. President Kumaratunga has a good track record in this area and is unlikely to support moves that could undermine religious harmony. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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